Philadelphia’s Alternative AIDS Memorial Experience

“Remembrance,” a program honoring Philadelphians lost to HIV/AIDS, includes a theatrical piece, a “going home” ceremony and more.

May 20, 2022 By Trent Straube

In honoring their residents lost to the AIDS epidemic, many cities have erected physical monuments and cultivated public gardens, but Philadelphia is taking a different route, one it describes as “an alternative memorial experience to Philadelphians lost to HIV/AIDS” titled Remembrance.

Remembrance includes an original theatrical piece performed in May, a “going home” ceremony and exhibit in June plus an online portal expected to launch around World AIDS Day, December 1. A related series of community listening sessions took place from January 2020 to December 2021.

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Remembrance is spearheaded by the William Way LGBT Community Center and its John J. Wilcox Jr Archives. You can read more about the project on WayGay.org/Remembrance.

“It is more important than ever to remember those from our communities who have passed from AIDS and to care for those who are living with HIV,” Philadelphia Mayor Jim Kenney said in a press release announcing the citywide project. “As we continue to work to bring the HIV epidemic to an end, the Remembrance project offers our city a unique and deeply meaningful opportunity to honor our loved ones who must not be forgotten.”

“It may be hard for some to remember, but there was a time in our city when a gay man who died of AIDS couldn’t even be put to rest with dignity. I’m honored that today we are launching Remembrance, an alternative memorial experience to provide the solemnity and reverence never afforded to those our community lost to HIV/AIDS,” added Chris Bartlett, executive director of the William Way LGBT Community Center. “Remembrance is inspired by the story of a South Philadelphia funeral homeowner, Ron Piselli. It was because of Ron’s bravery during the early days of the AIDS crisis that Philadelphians who died of AIDS could receive a loving and caring funeral at a time when the overwhelming majority of funeral homes rejected AIDS deaths. It is truly fitting we honor his courage, and their lives, by finally giving them the recognition on a citywide scale that they deserve.”

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The Remembrance website and press release describe the program’s main components as follows:

Community Listening Sessions

- An oral history project directed by community leader Waheedah Shabazz-El that collected over 40 stories of “community members who have passed unnoticed with or without the love and support of families.”
- Conducted January 2020 to December 2021

These Don’t Easily Scatter

The world premiere of These Don’t Easily Scatter, an original theatrical piece written and directed by three-time Obie Award winning playwright Ain Gordon. Inspired by the Community Listening Sessions, William Way’s Philadelphia AIDS Oral History Project, and over 20 interviews conducted by Gordon, the play follows three imagined figures navigating the early years of the AIDS crisis in Philadelphia.

- These Don’t Easily Scatter will feature actors Kathleen Chalfant, Bill Kux and Cherene Snow, and it is produced in collaboration with Gordon’s production company, Pick Up Performance Co.

- Performances: Friday, May 20 at 7:30 p.m.; Saturday, May 21, at 3 and 7:30 p.m.; and Sunday, May 22, at 3 p.m., at the William Way LGBT Community Center. Tickets are on sale via Eventbrite.

Gone and Forever

A public exhibit and “going home” ceremony, designed and directed by artist/entrepreneur Alex Stadler.

- Exhibit: June 21 to 25, 2022, William Way LGBT Community Center.
- “Going home” ceremony and public procession: June 25, 2022, at 3 p.m., William Way LGBT Community Center to The Church of St. Luke & the Epiphany The ceremony—a memorialization ceremony followed by a public procession to The Church of St. Luke and the Epiphany.

Remembrance Digital Archive

- A sustainable online portal, to serve as an archive of the memorial for future generations to interact with and give lasting testament to the lives of those lost to HIV/AIDS and the communities most affected.
- Expected launch: December 1, 2022 (World AIDS Day/Day Without Art)

Click #Memorial for a collection of POZ articles about AIDS memorials. You'll find recent headlines such as "Over 1,000 Names Added to the Wall Las Memorias AIDS Monument in Los Angeles," "Timothy Ray Brown Tribute Unveiled at National AIDS Memorial Grove" and "In Seattle, a Giant X Marks the AIDS Memorial Spot."

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